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LIFE OF

JOHN THE BAPTIST

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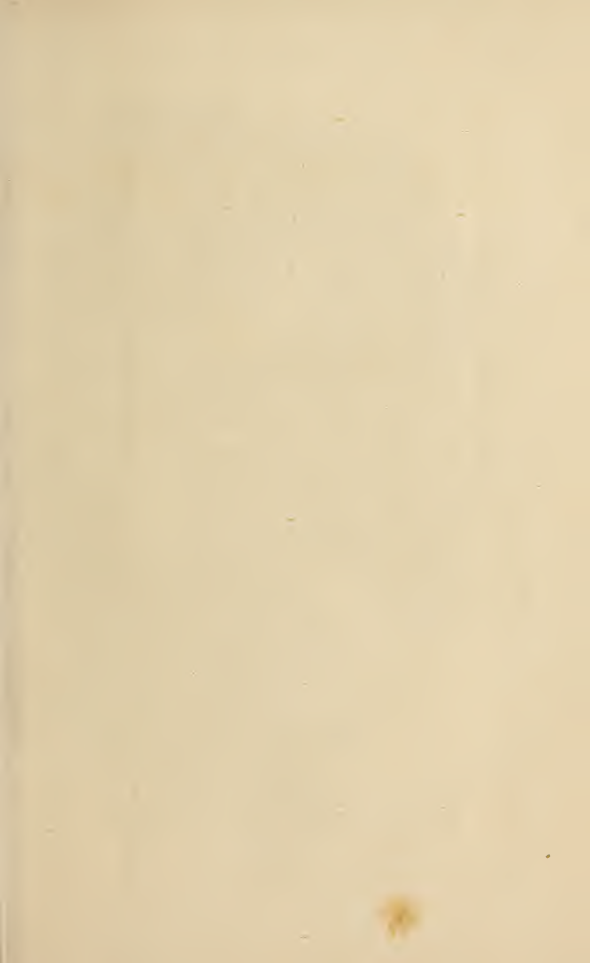
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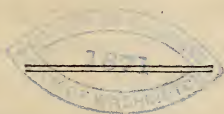
John the Baptist.

THE
LIFE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

BY REV. DANIEL SMITH,
AUTHOR OF "PARENT'S FRIEND," "LIFE OF MOSES," "DANIEL,"
AND OTHER WORKS FOR YOUTH.

"HE WAS A BURNING AND A SHINING LIGHT."

REVISED BY THE EDITORS.



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LIFE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

ADDRESS TO PARENTS AND TEACHERS.

THE writer of this, and other volumes of Scripture biography, would take this opportunity of explaining some of the views by which he has been influenced in their preparation.

The chief design has been to interest the young in the study of the Bible. For this purpose he has introduced descriptions of the places where the events narrated in the history occurred. Manners, customs, and prevailing sentiments among the Jews, Babylonians, Persians, &c., have been explained. The circumstances under which events occurred, or addresses were made, have been noticed, and a sort of running com-

mentary has been interwoven into the texture of the works.

These volumes are not of course adapted to the smallest class of children. The subjects, as well as the style, are above them. If the histories of Moses, David, St. Paul, Peter, and John the Baptist, are to be introduced *to them*, the books must be small, the style very simple, and only the leading features of the subjects presented.

The chief difficulty has been to determine at what standard of style to aim, and, having once fixed it, to adhere to it. The author would be glad to interest children as young as eleven or twelve years of age ; but he is not without his fears that his style may want adaptation even to them. He does not indeed fear for the more intelligent children of that age ; but very many are by no means as well

informed as they should be at that period of life ; and for these he would care more especially.

He is, however, induced to hope that he has not laboured in vain. There are many children and youth in the sabbath schools advanced beyond the age specified above, to whom he trusts these volumes will not be unacceptable. Besides, the large class of sabbath school publications are beginning to be considered as *family books*, capable of profiting adults as well as children ; and he entertains the hope that such persons may read the works he has prepared with both pleasure and profit.

In conclusion, the writer would say to those who may think the style of these volumes is not sufficiently simple, that though they may be right in this opinion, yet something may be said on the other side of the question.

First. The subjects are in themselves elevated. Moses was a prophet and legislator : David a sublime poet, a magistrate, and a prophet. The subject of St. Paul's history is very lofty ; the work of propagating religion for the world is certainly one of great dignity. Now whoever attempts to write these histories in monosyllables, or to narrate them in the circumscribed language of a child's vocabulary, will at least find himself engaged in no very easy task.

Secondly. May there not be some danger of bringing down the style of books for the young too low ? If we never use a word above them, how will they ever rise above the language of the nursery ? Should not their books oblige them to consult their dictionaries pretty often ? D. S.



THE PRINCIPAL TRAVELS
OF
JESUS CHRIST.



LIFE OF JOHN THE BAPTIST.

CHAPTER I.

Heralds in the East—Isaiah and Malachi prophesy of John—A great prophet expected—Parents of John—The angel Gabriel—Zacharias struck dumb—Anecdote of Fletcher—Wisdom of Providence.

IN the East it was a custom with kings, whenever they travelled, to send a herald before them, to announce their approach. If the journey led through desert countries, they sent a number of pioneers to open the passes, remove all impediments, and level the roads. But where it led only through inhabited districts they despatched a single herald, that the people might prepare to welcome the monarch, and provide for the entertainment of himself and his retinue.

In predicting the coming of the Messiah, the great King of nations, the prophet Isaiah alluded to this custom: he intimated that a messenger or herald should go before this illustrious personage to prepare the people for his appearance:

“The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord ;
Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain
and hill shall be made low ;
And the crooked shall be made straight,
And the rough places plain ;
And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed ;
And all flesh shall see it together,
For the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.”

The prophet Malachi also predicted that the Messiah's coming should be announced by a special messenger:

“Behold I will send my messenger,
And he shall prepare the way before me :
And the Lord, whom ye seek,
Shall suddenly come to his temple.”

These predictions led the Jews to

expect the appearance of a great and illustrious prophet as the harbinger or forerunner of the Messiah. They particularly expected he would resemble their great prophet Elijah, because Malachi had likened him to that eminent reformer. About the year of the world 4000, expectation was high, as the time drew near when the long-promised Deliverer was to come. Daniel's four hundred and ninety years, at the end of which he was to make his appearance, were expiring, and other prophecies pointed to that period as the time of his advent.

In the midst of this eager anxiety, a singular and interesting circumstance occurred in Jerusalem. Among the priests was one named Zacharias. He belonged to one of the twenty-four courses, or classes, into which they were divided, and was accustomed to attend to the service of the

temple in his regular turn. Zacharias was married to a descendant of Aaron, named Elizabeth. They were both persons of exalted piety. The sacred history informs us "they were righteous before God; walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless."

This is a pleasing picture, drawn to the life in a very few words. What scene more beautiful than that presented by a pious family! there are kind looks, kind words, and kind offices.

"Blest are the sons of peace,

Whose hearts and hopes are one,
Whose kind designs to serve and please
Through all their actions run.

Blest is the pious house,
Where zeal and friendship meet;

Their songs of praise, their mingled voice,
Make their communion sweet."

The week having come on which the class of priests to which Zacha-

rias belonged were to serve, it fell to his lot to burn incense. This incense was a compound of several sweet-smelling drugs, and was burned every morning and evening upon the altar of incense in the temple. It was offered at the time of morning and evening prayer ; and while the priest was burning it, the people were in the court of the temple praying.

On the occasion to which we allude, Zacharias went into the holy place to burn incense, while a great number of people remained in the court to pray. Probably it was the sabbath, or a feast day, on account of which the assembly was unusually large.

Just as this holy man was solemnly and prayerfully engaged in discharging the duties of his office, he beheld a bright and glorious being standing by the side of the altar of incense. We are not here informed what was

the appearance of this heavenly messenger, but a splendid description is given of him in the book of Daniel, which I shall here insert. "Then I lifted up mine eyes, and looked, and behold a certain man clothed in linen, whose loins were girded with fine gold of Uphaz: his body also was like the beryl, and his face as the appearance of lightning, and his eyes as lamps of fire, and his arms and his feet like in colour to polished brass, and the voice of his words like the voice of a multitude."

Zacharias was troubled at the sudden and unexpected appearance of this heavenly being, and fear fell upon him. When the angel perceived his agitation, he addressed him by name, telling him not to be afraid. He also assured him that God would give him a son, who should be called John.

Zacharias and Elizabeth were aged

people, and had no children. From the manner in which the angel addressed him, we should suppose he had prayed for a son, and also for the coming of the Messiah, for he was told his prayer was heard, and both these blessings should be given. The angel proceeded to observe that Zacharias should have joy and gladness, and many should rejoice at the birth of this son. For said he, "He shall be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink; and he shall be filled with the Holy Ghost even from his birth. And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God. And he shall go before Him [the Messiah, "God, manifest in the flesh,"] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just;

to make ready a people prepared of the Lord."

If we wish to know why the angel says he shall go forth in the spirit and power of Elijah, and why Malachi had also compared him to that prophet, we need only turn to the history of Elijah's life. We shall there find him to have been a man of the most dauntless courage, and untiring perseverance. His preaching was eloquent and powerful, and by his ministry many souls were brought to repentance and salvation.

The Jews considered him their greatest prophet, next to Moses. So John was to be, not only a prophet, but one of the greatest of prophets. But we shall speak more of this hereafter.

When Zacharias heard the words of the angel, he was slow to believe, and asked by what token, or sign, he

should know that this great promise should be fulfilled. This was not altogether right, and received a mild reproof.

The angel replied, "I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to show thee these glad tidings. And behold thou shalt be dumb, and not able to speak until the day that these things shall be performed, because thou believest not my words which shall be fulfilled in their season." The meaning of these words seems to be this: "I am Gabriel, the same who appeared to the prophet Daniel four hundred and ninety years since, with a message concerning the Messiah. Do you not recollect the prophecy which he has recorded, and his mentioning me by name? And have you forgotten that the four hundred and ninety years, at the end of which

Messiah was to come, are now drawing to a close? And now I am not come of my own accord, but as a messenger accustomed to stand before God, and go at his command; I am sent to make known to you these joyful tidings. You should, therefore, have believed my word, and considered the high honour God has put upon you by his great and gracious promise. But as you ask for a sign, a sign shall be given you; but it shall be one which shall reprove your weak faith, at the same time that it convinces you, and others, that I do indeed speak in the name of God. This is the sign; you shall be dumb, and not able to speak until the promise is fulfilled."

After the angel's departure, we may suppose Zacharias continued for some time in the holy place. This wonderful vision would naturally leave a train

of holy thoughts passing in his mind. Mingled emotions of wonder, love, and praise, would fill his soul, and he would feel

“ That sacred awe which dares not move,
And all the silent heaven of love.”

In this state of mind no account is taken of time : it passes, but its flight is unobserved. That great and good man, Mr. Fletcher, once entered a grove at evening for prayer, and there “ God manifested himself ” to him “ as he doth not unto the world.” Moments flew, and hours succeeded moments, but he knew it not, and when he looked about, behold it was morning. So Jacob continued in prayer all night.

Thus Zacharias stayed, and the people wondered. They did not depart, for it was their custom to wait till the priest came out of the holy place, and pronounced the blessing

upon them, which the Lord had commanded to Aaron, "The Lord bless thee, and keep thee, the Lord make his face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee, the Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

At length Zacharias made his appearance, but though the people waited, he did not pronounce the blessing. His long absence, his silence, and his unusually solemn countenance, led them to conclude he had seen a vision. He confirmed them in this conclusion by beckoning with his hand, and remaining silent. This circumstance was wisely directed by Divine Providence. It awakened interest and inquiry, as the news of the strange event spread, and led to the expectation of something of an extraordinary character.

Though speechless,* Zacharias was still able to burn incense, and perform the other duties of his office. He accordingly continued at the temple until the time of his service was ended, when he returned to his house. This is supposed to have been at Hebron, a city of the priests, about twenty miles from Jerusalem.

CHAPTER II.

Description of Nazareth—The angel Gabriel sent with another message—Mary, the mother of Jesus—Visits her cousin Elizabeth—Birth of John—Naming the child—Zacharias is restored to speech and hearing—His prophetic ode—General interest awakened by these extraordinary events.

IN Lower Galilee, just north of the great plain of Esdraelon, and about midway between the lake of Gene-sareth and the Mediterranean, was a

* The original word rendered speechless means both deaf and dumb.

small city, called Nazareth. It still exists, and is thus described by a modern traveller: "The town is situated upon the declivity of a hill. A vale spreads out before it, resembling a circular basin, encompassed by mountains. Fifteen mountains appear to meet to form an enclosure for this beautiful spot, around which they rise like the edge of a shell, as if to guard it against intrusion. It is a rich and beautiful field, in the midst of barren mountains."

To this city the angel Gabriel was sent, about six months after his appearance to Zacharias in the temple. He came with a message to a pious woman named Mary, a cousin of Elizabeth, the wife of Zacharias. She was soon to be married to a pious Israelite, named Joseph, a descendant of King David.

As Gabriel appeared to her, he said,

“Hail, thou that art highly favoured; the Lord is with thee, blessed art thou among women.” At the appearance and address of the angel, Mary was troubled; but he calmed her fears, saying, “Fear not, for thou hast found favour with God.” He then went on to inform her, that she was appointed by God to be the mother of the long-promised Messiah, who should be called “THE SON OF THE HIGHEST,” and who should establish a spiritual kingdom of which “THERE SHOULD BE NO END.” He also informed her, that her cousin Elizabeth would have a son, to be born six months before the Messiah.

Soon after this, Mary went to the city where Zacharias resided, to visit Elizabeth. As soon as she entered the house, Elizabeth’s heart was filled with the Holy Spirit, and it was revealed to her, that Mary was to

be the mother of JESUS. She pronounced Mary the most blessed of women, and declared her firm belief that there should be "a performance of those things which had been told her from the Lord."

Mary replied :

"My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
For he hath regarded the low estate of his hand
maiden,
For behold, from henceforth, all generations shall
call me blessed ;
For he that is mighty hath done to me great things,
And holy is his name,
And his mercy is on those that fear him ;
From generation, to generation,
He hath showed strength with his arm ;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination
of their hearts,
He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
And exalted them of low degree :
He hath filled the hungry with good things,
And the rich he hath sent empty away :
He hath holpen his servant Israel,
In remembrance of his mercy,
As he spoke to our fathers,
To Abraham, and to his seed for ever."

Having remained with Elizabeth three months, Mary returned to Nazareth. About the time of her return, God fulfilled his promise, and the son of Zacharias and Elizabeth was born. This was a joyful occasion. The relatives and friends of Elizabeth, having heard that the Lord in so remarkable a manner had magnified his mercy toward her, came together and rejoiced with her on this happy occasion.

It was customary with the Jews to name their children on the eighth day after their birth. Religious ceremonies were connected with the eighth day, which brought the friends together. When they proceeded to the naming of the child, they insisted that he should be called after his father; but his mother said, "Not so, his name shall be John." They replied, "There is none of thy kindred

that is called by this name," and then made signs to his father, who was still unable to hear or speak, to know how he would have him named. Zacharias took a pen and wrote, "His name is JOHN."

Immediately his speech and hearing were restored, according to the prediction of the angel. He had been for many months shut up in silence and solitude, unable to speak, or listen to the words of others: but now his tongue was loosened, and its first business was to praise God. While his heart was thus filled with thanksgiving, the Spirit of prophecy descended upon him. His mind was directed to the illustrious personage of whom his son was to be the forerunner, and in a lofty strain of prophetic poetry, he thus predicted his near approach:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
For he hath united and redeemed his people ;
And hath raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of his servant David.
(As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
Which have been since the world began.)
That we should be saved from our enemies,
And from the hand of all that hate us :
To perform the mercy promised to our fathers,
And to remember his holy covenant ;
The oath which he sware to our father Abraham,
That he would grant unto us,
That we being delivered out of the hand of our
enemies
Might serve him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before him
All the days of our life.
And thou, child,
Shalt be called the prophet of the HIGHEST !
For thou shalt go before the face of the LORD, to
prepare his ways ;
To give knowledge of salvation unto his people
By the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
Whereby the day-spring from on high hath visit-
ed us ;
To give light to them that sit in darkness and in
the shadow of death ;
To guide our feet in the way of peace.”

A holy influence attended these

extraordinary events. "Fear came on all that dwelt round about them : and all these sayings were noised abroad throughout all the hill-country of Judea. And all they that heard *them* laid *them* up in their hearts, saying, What manner of child shall this be ?"

CHAPTER III.

Childhood of John—His training—Decree of Cesar Augustus—Birth of Jesus—Jesus and John grow up strangers to each other.

THE period of childhood is one of great interest. To see a young being just entered upon existence growing up before us, to mark the progress of the mind as it expands like a flower just bursting from the bud, to notice its activity, and listen to its thousand inquiries, is a feast to persons of discernment and sensibility. How

beautifully does a poet describe this part of life :

“Let wo come then; beneath the heart’s own ray
How soon it melts like moonlit clouds away !
Then time flies fast, while laughing childhood
throws

Handfuls of roses at him as he goes :
And all the future, like a lake, is spread
In calm expanse beneath hope’s angel tread :
Home is our realm ; our throne a mother’s knee ;
Our crown, her smile, bent o’er us lovingly.”

But if childhood be so interesting a period in common cases, how much more so must it have been in that of John? Here was a child who had been the subject of prophecy for hundreds of years, and whose birth had been announced by an angel from heaven—who was to be one of the greatest of prophets, and the harbinger of the Saviour of the world. How then must his parents and friends have looked upon the infant John. With what care and anxiety did they watch over him, and how diligent were they

in informing his mind and moulding his morals. King Solomon had said long before, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it." No doubt Zacharias and Elizabeth remembered these words, and tried daily to train up their son "in the nurture and admonition of the Lord." I suppose they also remembered the words of Moses. "And these words which I command thee this day shall be in thine heart, and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." How delightful it would be to John to hear of Adam and Enoch, of Noah, Abraham, and David. A venerable minister, speaking of his grandmother, says, "The young people were delighted

with her society, and profited too, as she was accustomed in entertaining them with her conversation, to draw many of her anecdotes from the Scriptures, which she would tell in a soft pious strain that made an impression on my mind lasting as life." Methinks I almost see the child John, as he stands with sparkling eyes by his mother's knee, and looking up in her face, listens to her accounts of the patriarchs and prophets, and to her instructions drawn from their writings.

Under such training, such a child would not fail to make rapid improvement. We need not be surprised to learn that, "*the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit,*" that he became remarkable for strength of intellect, and boldness of resolution, and his attainments in religious knowledge.

About six months after the birth of John, the infant Jesus was born.

Joseph and Mary usually resided in Nazareth. But, about this time, Augustus Cesar issued a decree for numbering and taxing the people of his empire. One part of this decree was exceedingly oppressive. It required persons who had settled at a distance, to return to the city of their birth to be numbered and taxed. Being originally of the city of Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary were obliged to repair to that place. While they were there Jesus was born. But Joseph and Mary returned again to Nazareth. Here Jesus spent most of his time, until he was thirty years of age, the period when the Jewish law allowed persons designed for the priesthood to enter upon the office.

The residence of John was about one hundred miles from Nazareth. This circumstance was wisely ordered, so that when John went forth to

commence his ministry, and to bear testimony to the Messiah, he did not know his person, but received all his information concerning him directly from God.

CHAPTER IV.

Scenery of the hill country of Judea—Its effects in forming the character of John—His parents models of excellence—John enters upon his public ministry—His personal appearance and habits—Character of his preaching.

THE hill country of Judea abounded in wild and romantic scenery. Here a bare and rugged hill lifted its head to the storms, and there opened a deep glen leading to a small but picturesque valley, enamelled with flowers. Occasionally a spring gushed out at the side of a hill forming a small rivulet, and uniting with kindred rills wound its way beneath overhanging shrubs and trees to the Jor,

dan or the Dead Sea. In the clefts of the rocks, the wild bees deposited large stores of honey, while the vine shot from the scanty, but fertile soil, and climbed the side of the steep rock, or spread its mantling foliage over the tops of the nearest shrubs and trees, displaying at the same time its rich and tempting clusters of fruit.

Amid such scenes John spent his time until he was thirty years of age. The soft luxury of courts and banqueting rooms had not exerted their enfeebling influence upon his character. The fire and boldness of his noble spirit had suffered no diminution from ease and indulgence. His morals were uncontaminated by the vices of crowded cities. Trained up in nature's own school, amid her sublime and inspiring scenery, and having before him those fine models of intelligent virtue, his excellent

parents, and above all, being favoured with an unusual measure of divine influence, he was prepared to come forth as a prophet of the highest order.

The time had at length arrived, when he was to enter upon his public ministry. Descending from the hill country, he opened his mission in the populous valley of the Jordan. Like the prophet Elijah, he seemed much like a messenger issuing from the other world. His appearance was sudden and unexpected, and his person and manners altogether singular. As though he had little concern with the pleasures of this world, his dress was a hairy mantle, "bound about with a leathern girdle, and his meat locusts and wild honey," or honey which had been deposited in the clefts of the rocks by the wild bees.

The character of his address was

bold and alarming. The substance of his preaching was repentance toward God, and faith in the promised and already approaching Messiah; or, in other words, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand," the King Messiah is on his way to set up his kingdom in every penitent and believing heart.

The power of his inspired eloquence filled his hearers with awe, and his announcement of the speedy fulfilment of the prophecies in the coming of the Messiah awoke universal interest. Hundreds flocked to his ministry from Jerusalem, and from the towns and villages of Judea and Galilee. Some thought *he* must be the Messiah, but he assured them he was not, "saying unto the people, that they should believe on him that should come after him, that is, on CHRIST JESUS."

Of those who professed to be truly penitent, he took a solemn pledge by baptism, that when the Messiah should make his appearance among them, they would enrol themselves with the number of his disciples.

Thus did he fulfil the prophecy of the angel: "And many of the children of Israel shall he turn to the Lord their God: and he shall go before him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared of the Lord."

"Hark, in the wilderness a cry,
A voice that loudly calls, Prepare,
Prepare your hearts, for God is nigh,
And means to make his entrance there.

"The Lord your God shall quickly come,
Sinners, repent, the call obey,
Open your hearts to make him room;
Ye desert souls, prepare the way.

“The Lord shall clear his way through all,
Whate’er obstructs, obstructs in vain;
The vale shall rise, the mountain fall,
Crooked be straight, and rugged plain.”

CHAPTER V.

The popularity of John as a preacher—Pharisees and Sadducees—What kind of a Messiah they expected—John gives them a solemn and cutting reproof—John’s instructions to the publicans and soldiers—Repentance—What it is—How to overcome evil.

THE popularity of John as a preacher daily increased. To this the suddenness of his appearance, the singularity of his dress and manners, and the power of his eloquence, greatly contributed. But it was more especially the character of his mission which awoke so great an interest. His countrymen were looking for the appearance of the promised Messiah, but they knew a great prophet was to go before him and announce his

coming. John claimed to be that prophet, and all were anxious to hear what he had to say about the Messiah. Great numbers flocked to hear from far and near.

Among those who came, were many Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were the most numerous and popular sect among the Jews. They had their name from the word *pharash*, which signifies *separated*, or *set apart*, and they applied this title to themselves, because they professed to separate themselves from the rest of the Jews, for superior strictness in religion.

They pretended to govern their conduct by the law of Moses, and the traditions of their elders, or chief men; and they accounted these traditions to be of greater authority than the Scriptures themselves. They believed in the existence of spirits and

angels, the resurrection of the body, and future rewards and punishments. But they were proud, arrogant, avaricious, and hypocritical. They made great pretensions to justice, while they despoiled the helpless widow and orphan of their little property: and they made long prayers in public places, to be seen of men. Haughty and censorious, they boasted that, from their accurate knowledge of religion, they were the favourites of Heaven: and thus trusting in themselves that they were righteous, they despised others.

The Sadducees took their name from one Sadoc, who maintained that there was no future state of rewards and punishments. They also denied the existence of angels and spirits, and the resurrection of the dead. Though they professed to believe in the law of Moses, they paid very little

regard to its authority, and were, in fact, a set of *practical* infidels, guilty of all sorts of wickedness.

Both these sects were expecting a Messiah, but it was altogether "*such a one as themselves*" that they looked for. They wanted a military Messiah, who should go forth at the head of a slaughtering army, and enrich them with the spoils of vanquished nations.

It was their expectation, and eager desire for such a Messiah, that induced them to go out to hear the new minister. When John saw such persons flocking to his ministry, and asking to be baptized, he felt mingled emotions of pity and abhorrence. Knowing that there was no hope of doing them good, unless he could show them the wickedness of their own hearts, and being convinced that desperate diseases require powerful

remedies, he addressed them in the most alarming language. Comparing them to a generation of malignant serpents, or a brood of poisonous vipers, he inquired, “Who hath warned *you* to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth, therefore, fruits worthy of repentance, and begin not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father; for I say unto you, God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham. And now, also, the axe is laid unto the root of the tree: every tree, therefore, which bringeth not forth good fruit, is hewn down, and cast into the fire.” The meaning of this pointed address may be better understood by the young reader, if we give it in other words. It seems to be this: “What has brought you, Pharisees and Sadducees, here? and why do you ask for baptism? Do you not know that the doctrine which

I preach is the doctrine of repentance? This is the preparation you must have to meet the coming Messiah. If you would receive any benefit from him, weep over your sins, sorrow for them with a godly sorrow, and break them off at once, and for ever. Your haughty spirits must be humbled. Your self-righteousness must give way to a broken and contrite spirit. You, who have in your possession 'the unjust balances, the bag of deceitful or false weights, and the scant measure, who have robbed the widow and the orphan, and oppressed the hireling in his wages,' must restore your unjust gains. You who have grown rich by robbery must return what you have so cruelly taken away. In this way bring forth fruits worthy of repentance. I know you will reply to this, We are the children of Abraham, and are God's

covenant people. But I assure you, God's promises are only to those children of Abraham who follow his example, and live holy lives, as he lived. And if the promises of God were likely to fail because there were no holy children of Abraham, God could raise them up, or create them out of the stones of the street, or dust of the earth. And now, what you do, do quickly. For as the axeman lays his axe to the root of the tree that he may prepare to cut it down immediately, so God is now preparing to cut down and destroy every one who does not bear good fruit."

This alarming address was not without its effect. Some were awakened and cried out, "What shall we do." In reply, he first began to teach them their duty to each other. They were uncharitable and oppressive, and he

taught them not to expect any mercy from God while they were unmerciful to one another. "He that hath two coats," said he, "let him impart to him that hath none; and he that hath meat, let him do likewise." St. John taught the same doctrine: "Who-so hath this world's goods, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?" Christ would have us show our faith in him, and our love to him, by being merciful, as he is merciful.

Next the publicans came, and said to John, "Master, and what shall we do?" These men were tax-gatherers for the Roman government. As the Jews hated their conquerors, it was mortifying to their pride, as well as galling to their avarice, to be obliged to pay them tribute. This made these

tax-gatherers very odious to them; besides, many of them were unjust, and made use of their office to extort money from the people for their own private use. In his reply to these men, John struck at their idol sin, their oppressive and dishonest gains. "Exact," said he, "no more than is appointed you."

There was still another class who had been touched with a sense of their sinfulness by John's heart-searching preaching. They were soldiers, probably Herod's soldiers. They came forward and asked, "And what shall we do?" He immediately pointed to the vices to which a licentious soldiery are under the greatest temptation. "Do violence," said he, "to no man, neither accuse any falsely, and be content with your wages." That is, "Put no man in fear, either from wanton cruelty, or in order to

extort property by threats of violence ; nor accuse any man falsely, in order to obtain a reward for a pretended zeal in the discharge of duty, or to share in the fines and confiscations inflicted on suspected persons ; and be content with your wages, not seeking to obtain more, either by fraud or force."

This was by no means all that John taught the people. His chief object was to turn their attention to the Messiah, as their only Saviour. But he began with repentance, as without this, his coming could do them no good. The Messiah himself would not save them *in their sins*. The first business then was, "*to cease to do evil, and learn to do well.*"

The preaching of John may teach us a very important lesson. We see here the nature of true repentance. People may often deceive themselves

about this. You may hear a person say, "I always repent of my sins." But how? "Why, if I sin I always *feel* that I have done wrong." And this is all his repentance. He calls *the reproaches of a guilty conscience* repentance. Because he feels *reproved* for his sins, he maintains that he repents of them. What a dreadful delusion!

Another is sorry for his sins *because they are known to the world, and have brought him into disgrace.* A third is sorry for his, *because they have ruined his health or wasted his property;* and a fourth, *only because he fears punishment.* Now, all this may be without one particle of repentance. Do you ask, What then is repentance? how sorry must a person be for his sins? I answer, *Sorry enough to give them up.* If a man has defrauded his neighbour out of one or one hundred dollars, he

must go and return it. If he has said that which is untrue about him, he must confess the untruth. If he has been self-willed, ungrateful and disobedient to God, he must be sorry enough to continue so no longer. The best evidence of repentance is reformation; and if there is no reformation there is no repentance. If my young reader has been disobedient to his parents, unkind to his brothers and sisters or associates, or has spent the holy sabbath in an improper manner, he must do so no more: and if he has sinned against God by refusing to give him his heart, he must refuse no longer. If he does, he has not repented at all. If he persist in his sins, God will not forgive him at all: and if God does not forgive him, he must perish for ever. My dear reader, do you repent of your sins? do you

break them off, and thus “bring forth fruits worthy of repentance?”

“The fruitless showers of worldly wo
Fall dark to earth, and never rise;
While tears that from repentance flow
In bright exhalament reach the skies.”

Again : The answer of John to those who inquired what they should do, may show us the necessity of guarding against our “most easily besetting sins.” Almost every person is more in danger from some one sin than he is from others. With one, pride is the besetting sin ; with another, covetousness ; with another still, deception, or falsehood ; while a fourth is disobedient to parents, or has a bad temper. All these particular sins gain strength by indulgence ; and are more and more difficult to overcome the longer we continue to practise them. Perhaps it will be asked, “How are we to overcome these besetting sins?”

Now, I think the apostle Paul has answered this question. He tells us "TO OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD."

If we have been covetous, we must overcome this disposition by liberality : an evil temper must be overcome by constantly cherishing feelings of kindness : pride must be turned out of the heart by letting humility into it : and the spirit of self-will must give place to that of submission.

I do not say that we can do all this alone. Our Saviour says, "Without me ye can do nothing." But his apostle says, "Christ strengthening me, I can do all things." We must pray, then, while we labour. We must ask for divine influence to assist us. While *God* "works in us, both to will and to do, *we* must work out our salvation with fear and trembling."

I can illustrate this. In the spring we put up our fences, we plough, and

sow, and plant. If we neglect this, we get no crop. We never reap where no one has sowed. But after all our ploughing, sowing, and planting, we cannot make a single blade of corn, or stalk of wheat grow. If God withhold the warm sun and refreshing showers, all our labour is in vain. But if we do our part, and God does his, then our fields are crowned with a rich harvest. Now prayer, and faith, and painstaking are as necessary as ploughing and sowing. God will give that to our labour and prayers which he has never promised without them.

Once more : As we keep briars, thistles, and other noxious plants and weeds out of our fields and gardens, by filling them with valuable grains and precious fruits, so we must cultivate that which is good in our hearts, or they will be overrun with evil.

CHAPTER VI.

John's character tested—False Christs—John's humility—His testimony of Christ—Necessity of a new heart—Thrashing floors in the East—End of the wicked—Affectionate address to the reader.

A FAIR opportunity now offered for testing the character of John. Expectation was high concerning the coming of the Messiah. The prophecies showed the time had arrived for his advent, and every day the people were looking for his appearance. Indeed, about this time, or a little after, so great and general was the interest, that several impostors took advantage of it, and proclaimed themselves to be the Messiah. Josephus says that there were many who, pretending to divine inspiration, deceived the people. They led numbers out to the desert, pretending that God would there show them the signs of

liberty, meaning deliverance from the Roman power. One Egyptian false prophet led thirty thousand men into the desert, who were almost all cut off by Felix, the Roman governor. There was also one *Dostheus*, who pretended he was the Messiah.

In the midst of such a state of things how easily might John have set up a claim to the Messiahship! So powerful was his preaching, and such an influence had he won in the public mind, that some even came to ask him if he was not the Christ. Had John been an ambitious man, or any thing short of a prophet of the Lord, what a temptation was now before him! But it was one which had not the least influence upon him. He entertained the most lowly thoughts of himself. His heart was the garden of humility.

‘Humility, that low sweet root
From which all heavenly virtues shoot.’

“I,” said he, “indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear; he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost and with fire.” This declaration of John is expressive of the most profound humility and reverence. The Jewish shoes were a kind of sandals, fastened to the foot with strings, and were laid aside to wash the feet on entering a house before meals. The unloosing the sandals, and carrying them away till wanted, was an office of the lowest kind, both among Jews and Greeks. No words could therefore more forcibly express the sense that John had of the superiority of Christ. In his view, he was supreme Lord, and

himself a servant so low in comparison of this "MIGHTIER" Being, that he was not worthy even to unloose and bear his sandals.*

There is in John's declaration another point not to be overlooked. He declared Christ should baptize them with the Holy Ghost and with fire. This shows, that while he considered repentance to be of the utmost importance, still he knew this alone was insufficient. We must not only repent, but we must be renewed. The *heart of stone*, the cold, hard, unfeeling, ungrateful heart, must not only be mourned over, but it must be "taken away," and Christ must give us *hearts of flesh*, that is, tender, loving, grateful, obedient hearts. The fire must consume our sins, and purify our souls. Christ must impart to us a searching and purifying influence. This is bap-

* Watson.

tizing us with the Holy Ghost and with fire. This is what our Saviour calls being "born again;" and without which we cannot see the kingdom of heaven, much less can we ever hope to enter it.

John went on to enforce the necessity of this work by the most alarming language. He told them the Messiah's "fan was in his hand, and that he would thoroughly cleanse his floor, and gather the wheat into his garner, but would burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." The impressive metaphors here used are taken from the process of thrashing among the Jews. The thrashing place was selected on elevated ground, open on every side to the wind. Though called a floor, it was nothing but a plat of ground levelled and rolled, so as to be hard and smooth. The sheaves, being thrown upon it, were

trodden by oxen, or beaten by a machine. Then the winnowing fan was used to throw up the grain to the wind, that the chaff might be separated from it, while the straw, being crushed beneath the feet of the oxen, or by the machine, was rendered worthless, and was reserved with the chaff to heat their ovens.

Thus, as the worthless chaff was only fit for burning, so John represents obstinate sinners as reserved for the fire, with this difference: the fire which consumed the chaff was extinguishable, but those who contend with God are to be ever consuming, ever feeling his displeasure, for the fire is "unquenchable." Dear impenitent reader, dare you live in sin any longer? can you bear this "unquenchable fire?" Or rather, will you not fly to Jesus, and rest not till your peace is made with him?

“Jesus, lover of my soul
Let me to thy bosom fly ;
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.

All my trust on thee is stay’d,
All my help on thee I bring,
Cover my defenceless head
With the shadow of thy wing.”

CHAPTER VII.

No personal acquaintance between John and Jesus—The Spirit gives John a sign by which he may know the Messiah—Jesus comes to John for baptism—John’s feelings on that occasion—An extraordinary scene—Messengers from the Sanhedrim wait on John—The interview overruled for good.

THOUGH John was daily predicting the speedy appearance of the Messiah, he had still no personal acquaintance with him. Their mothers were cousins, it is true, but they lived at a distance from each other, and we never hear of their meeting after about the time of John’s birth. God knew the Jewish rulers would reject

the Messiah as an impostor. He therefore so directed events that they should not avail themselves of the plea that there was a concert between him and John. John lived in the thinly inhabited hill country, and held very little intercourse with the world, while Jesus continued with his parents at Nazareth.

That John might know the Messiah when he should see him, God gave him a sign. He informed him that he should see the Spirit descending in the form or similitude of a dove, and alighting upon Jesus.

John was now at Bethabara, near where the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea. Here he had preached and baptized such numbers that he was called John the Baptist, or the Baptizer.

While thus faithfully fulfilling his mission, Jesus came from Nazareth

to be baptized. It is difficult to tell the reasons why the Messiah should wish to be baptized by John. He certainly needed not *the baptism of repentance*, for he was "holy, harmless, undefiled, and separate from sinners:" he had no sins to repent of. Some suppose it was to be initiated into the priestly office, according to the customary forms, but this is not quite clear. Others suppose it was to honour John's ministry, and that Jesus and John might give mutual testimony to each other. But we are nowhere distinctly informed that this was the design. We simply know that it was the will of God, and that is enough. One indication of the divine will is worth a thousand reasons. John and Jesus only wanted to know His good pleasure, and it was more than their meat and drink to do it.

When John saw Jesus coming to his baptism, the prophetic spirit which rested upon him seems to have suggested that this was the Messiah. Overwhelmed with a sense of his inferiority, he said, "I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?" The Saviour replied, "Suffer it to be so now, for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness." This was sufficient: John objected no farther, but immediately administered the sacred ordinance.

After Jesus had been baptized, a very interesting and extraordinary event took place. As he prayed, the heavens were opened, and "*the Spirit of God descending like a dove*" rested upon him. Probably the appearance was that of a white lucid flame, parted like the wings of a dove, and descending with a slow hovering motion. This was a beautiful and expressive

symbol. A dove has long been considered as an emblem of innocence and peace. How significant of the character of our blessed Lord!

The sign which John had now received, testifying that Jesus was the Messiah, was still farther confirmed by an audible voice from heaven, which was heard distinctly pronouncing, "THOU ART MY BELOVED SON, IN WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED."

Here were the Father speaking from heaven, the Son who had just received baptism, and the Spirit assuming a visible form. This may remind us of a great and important truth, namely, that Jehovah is revealed to us in his word as FATHER, SON, AND HOLY GHOST.*

The powerful preaching of John, and his extraordinary zeal and sanctity, had made a very strong and ge-

* See Clarke on Matt. iii, 16.

neral impression on the Jewish nation. Though he gave no countenance to such an opinion, many were beginning to think he might be the Messiah. This, with his increasing popularity, alarmed the great Jewish council, called the Sanhedrim. Learning also that his teaching did not agree with their notions of a military Messiah, they sent some of their chief men to visit him.

Probably they hoped to draw something from him by which they might take measures to silence him.

The messengers, having arrived at Bethabara, asked him if he claimed to be the Messiah. He told them he did not. What then, said they, "Art thou Elijah?" John replied, "I am not." By this he did not mean that he was not the prophet who was to come "*in the spirit and power of Elijah.*" But

as they supposed Elijah in person was to come, and asked if he was the real Elijah, he answered their question just as they proposed it. They then inquired, "Art thou that prophet?" Perhaps they meant by this question, "Art thou that prophet whose coming was predicted by Moses?" Deut. xviii, 15. Or, as they had a tradition among them, that Jeremiah was to come back in the time of the Messiah's advent, it may be they wished to know whether John professed to be that prophet. John told them he was not any of those prophets to whom they referred. They then asked, "Who art thou? that we may give an answer to them that sent us. What sayest thou of thyself?" He replied, that he was the person whose coming was predicted by the prophet Isaiah, as the Messiah's herald. "I am," said he,

“the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord.”

This answer did not at all satisfy them. They belonged to the sect of the Pharisees, and were very much attached to their old customs, and very jealous of innovations. Though they believed, when the Messiah came, he, or some of his retinue, would baptize all, yet as John confessed he was not the Messiah, they thought he was exercising authority which did not belong to him. “Why baptizest thou then,” said they, “if thou be not that Christ, nor Elijah, neither that prophet?” John answered, that to prepare them for the reception of the Messiah he called them to repentance and admitted the penitent to his baptism. But he told them it was only with water as a sign or emblem of the spiritual cleansing which they must

have. But he assured them there was one already among them, whom as yet they knew not; one so greatly his superior, that he was unworthy to be even his lowest servant—to unloose his shoes, or sandals.

These messengers had probably come with no very good design. But God so overruled their mission that it gave John an excellent opportunity to proclaim the Messiah. The conversation took place in presence of a large concourse of people, who would not fail to listen with interest, and who must have been more deeply impressed than ever with the expectation that the long expected Deliverer was at hand.

CHAPTER VIII.

Jesus is tempted in the desert forty days—He returns to Bethabara—John publicly announces him as the Messiah—Explanation of the title, “Lamb of God”—John points out the Messiah to Andrew—John’s last testimony of Jesus.

AFTER his baptism, Jesus went into the desert, where he continued forty days. As he came not only to atone for our sins, but also to set us an example, it was necessary that he should suffer as we suffer, and be tempted as we are. On this account the Spirit of God had led him into the wilderness, where Satan was permitted to tempt him, and where he waged a long spiritual conflict with the powers of darkness.

After the tempter had been foiled in every attack, and our blessed Lord had set us an example of successful resistance, he again returned to Bethabara. He was now about to enter

on his public ministry, and it was proper that his herald should distinctly point him out to the multitudes who were expecting his coming. As soon, therefore, as John saw him approaching, he announced him as the Christ. Addressing his hearers, he cried, "BEHOLD THE LAMB OF GOD, WHICH TAKETH AWAY THE SIN OF THE WORLD."

The title, "Lamb of God," was very significant. Isaiah had spoken of the Messiah under the figure of a lamb offered in sacrifice. "He is led," said the prophet, "like a *lamb* to the slaughter." In the temple two lambs were daily slain, and offered as a sin offering, or *typical* atonement. These pointed to the Messiah as the lamb provided by God to make a *real* atonement. In these sacrifices several things are to be noticed.

First, The lamb is a very innocent

creature. So Jesus was “holy, harmless, and undefiled.” Secondly, The lamb had to be slain; its blood was shed. So Jesus was to be led “like a lamb to the slaughter;” his blood was to be shed. Thirdly, The lamb was offered (typically) as a sin offering, to atone for transgression. So Jesus was to die as a sin offering. Fourthly, The lamb bled not for himself, but as a sacrifice for others. So Jesus died not for himself, but for guilty men—he died “the *just* for the *unjust*, that he might bring us to God.” He was

“————— the victim slain,
A sacrifice for guilty men,
By the Eternal Spirit made
An offering in the sinner’s stead.”

After announcing Jesus as the *Lamb of God*, John went on to say to his hearers, “This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me.” He also

assured them he had enjoyed no personal acquaintance with him, and when he began to proclaim his approach did not even know him: that he only knew in general that his own preaching and baptism were designed by God as the means of preparing the way for him. "But," said he, "he that sent me to baptize with water, said unto me, Upon whom thou shalt see the Spirit descending and remaining on him, the same is he that baptizeth with the Holy Ghost. And I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it abode upon him. And I saw, and bear record, that this is the SON OF GOD."

The next day after John had publicly pointed out Jesus as the Lamb of God, he was standing with two of his disciples; one of these was Andrew, brother to Peter. Both he and Peter were afterward apostles of

Jesus. The other is supposed to have been John, the son of Zebedee, who also became an apostle, and was called the beloved disciple. As they stood together, Jesus passed by, and John again exclaimed, "Behold the Lamb of God." Immediately the two disciples followed Jesus, who, observing them, said, "What seek ye?" They replied, "Master, where dwellest thou?" He answered, "Come and see." They went, and doubtless much to their satisfaction and delight, spent the evening with him.

After this interview, Andrew went and found his brother Peter, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah." Peter immediately went with Andrew to Jesus, and this introduction prepared the way for both these brothers to become apostles.

Some time after these events, a debate arose between some of John's

disciples and some other persons, the occasion of which was this. Jesus was at this time in Judea, and some of his disciples were by his direction baptizing great numbers of the people who received him as the Messiah. John was in a place called Enon, where he still preached and baptized. The subject of debate seems to have been, either which baptism was the most efficacious, John's or Christ's; or, as some suppose, how Christ, who had come to John for baptism, should rebaptize John's disciples. To settle the matter, they came and said to John, "Master, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou bearest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him."

John replied, that a man of God, or prophet, could assume no higher dignity than God saw fit to confer upon him. He reminded them that he

never pretended to be the Messiah, but only his herald, sent to give notice of his coming, and prepare the people for his reception. He told them, that so far was he from envying his growing fame, or the number of his disciples, that he greatly rejoiced in both; and that his highest joy was, that men should cheerfully submit to the Messiah, and pay him all due honour. John farther assured them, that Jesus must increase, and become more and more glorious, while, said he, "I must decrease," must gradually decline, until I disappear, for the end of my ministry is in a great measure answered, and I expect soon to be dismissed from it.

He then proceeded to bear the most ample testimony to Jesus as the great Messiah, setting forth his dignity in the plenitude of his commission, the excellence of his gifts, the nearness

of his relation to his heavenly Father as his only Son, and the greatness of his power as universal Judge. This was the last testimony of John which is found in the sacred history, and it ends with these remarkable words: "*He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life, and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.*"

My dear reader, reflect on the solemn words, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life." What a promise for a poor guilty sinner! What is there tender or affecting, winning, inviting, rich, or glorious, that is not to be found here?

"To him that in His name believes,
Eternal life with him is given;
Into himself he all receives,
Pardon, and holiness, and heaven."

Well may such a soul exclaim:

“I leap for joy, pursue my way,
And as a bounding hart fly home;
Through all eternity to prove
His nature and his name is love.”

But, on the other hand, “He that believeth not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abideth on him.” O who can endure this !

“What ! to be banish’d from my God,
And yet forbid to die ;
To linger in eternal pain,
And death for ever fly.”

“O, wretched state of dark despair,
To see my God remove,
And fix my endless portion where
I must not taste his love.”

CHAPTER IX.

A wicked king—John reproves him, and is cast into prison—The wicked in prosperity, and the righteous in adversity—This is not a world of punishment—Testimony of the Bible—Address to the reader.

SOME TIME before the days of John the Baptist, the Jews had been conquered by the Romans. It was still

under their government, and received its rulers by the appointment of the Roman emperor. A few years before the birth of John, an Idumean named Herod had been appointed to the government, with the title of king. After spending a long life in the practice of the most savage tyranny he died, and left his kingdom to be divided between his sons. Among these was one called Herod Antipas, who governed Galilee and Perea with the title of tetrarch.* He was a genuine son of a bloodthirsty father. Besides his other crimes, this vicious prince had married Herodias, the wife of his own brother. Herodias was the granddaughter of the first Herod, and had married her uncle Philip. But she forsook him, and married Herod Antipas, who was also her uncle.

* A tetrarch was, literally, governor of the fourth part of a Roman province.

Having become acquainted with John, Herod entertained great veneration for him. His holy life and eminent abilities won his admiration. He listened to John with respectful attention, and even began to practise many things which this holy minister enjoined. But John knew very well there was no hope of his salvation while he was publicly living with another man's wife. He knew too the revengeful and bloody character of the whole race of Herods. But he was not to be deterred from duty by fear of danger while love and fidelity to his Master, and compassion for a perishing sinner, prompted him to its performance. He also knew the evil effects of this shameful example upon the public morals, and in language mild, modest, and yet pointed, he told Herod it was not lawful for him to have his brother's wife. This

was touching Herod's idol sin at the core. In the phrensy of his passion he would have put John to death immediately, but he feared the people. His abuse of power had already kindled their resentments, and should he now proceed to put a holy prophet to death, he feared a flame might break out which he should be unable to quench. He therefore contented himself by seizing John and casting him into prison. Josephus says he was imprisoned at Macherus, a town near the place where the Jordan empties into the Dead Sea. He also tells us that Herod was jealous of John's influence, because he drew so great a multitude after him. This perhaps was the pretence; but the true cause was his hatred, and that of Herodias, because he had censured their scandalous marriage.

We now see John in prison, and

probably loaded with chains, while Herod and his guilty paramour are in a palace. What a picture is this! John, the eloquent and holy prophet, on whose lips listening multitudes had hung with so much wonder and delight, and from whom they had received so much edification—John, who had been the means of saving so many souls, who was just in the prime of life, and in the midst of his usefulness, is seized by the hand of ruthless violence and thrown into a prison. And for what? Why, for the tender solicitude he felt for the cause of public morals, and the love he bore to a perishing sinner. The highest virtue is his only crime.

On the other side of the picture, behold Herod, with his guilty companion. As a magistrate, he is bound by every righteous principle to set an example of virtue and uprightness

before his subjects. His life should be blameless, and his decisions impartial. He should be the friend and father of his people. The oppressed should find in him a deliverer, the poor a benefactor, and the wicked a righteous judge.

But, instead of this, he turns the office of justice into that of tyranny. The power which was given him to defend the innocent he employs for their oppression. To complete his crimes he sets an example of public and high-handed robbery before the whole nation, by wresting from his own brother that which was most dear to him, the wife of his youth. Now, are men punished for their sins in this life? Some say they are. But why then is not this guilty Herod in a dungeon and loaded with chains? Why is he not fed on the bread and water of affliction, and suffering as

much more than this, as his giant crimes deserve? Instead of this, the innocent John is in the dungeon, while the criminal Herod lives in a palace, rides in his gilded chariot, sways his sceptre over his thousands, feasts on the choicest delicacies, and rests upon a bed of down!

This is not a world of retribution. Men do not receive their punishment in this life. Those who think they do are under an awful delusion, and many *try to think* there is no punishment after death, because they wish to be at ease in their sins.

The Bible tells us of wicked persons, and some who are horribly wicked, who are so far from receiving their punishment in this world, that this life is to them one of high prosperity. Hear God's language on this subject: "Behold, these are the ungodly that prosper in the world. They

are not in trouble as other men, neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them as a chain, violence covereth them as a garment. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, [they blaspheme God, ridicule religion, mock at providence, and laugh at future punishment,] and their tongue walketh through the earth." Yet, "their eyes stand out with fatness, they have more than heart could wish, and there are no bands [or terrors] in their death." But there is a God that judgeth righteously, and if they repent not they "shall be turned into hell, with all the nations that forget God."

My dear reader, think of these things. Though a sinful world may throw its allurements around you,

though it may promise you much, yet beware of its flatteries. A life of sin will end in sorrow—sorrow deep, fearful, and unending. “Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth, and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth—but know thou, that for all these things God will bring thee into judgment.”

CHAPTER X.

John sends two of his disciples to Jesus—Object of their visit—Miracles performed in their presence—Christ’s opinion of John—His reproof to the Pharisees and Sadducees.

IN the last chapter of our history we left John in prison. Here he remained for some time, though we know not precisely how long. While he continued in confinement some of his disciples visited him, and informed him of the wonderful works which were performed by Jesus. The rising

glory of his Lord was doubtless a matter of much delight to John. For himself, he had no doubts about Jesus being the Messiah, even before he had begun to work miracles. But he rejoiced that such evidences were now given as would confirm the faith of others. As the Messiah had not come in that splendour which many expected would attend his appearance, some even among the honest inquirers were perplexed, and hardly knew what to believe. This appears to have been the case with some of John's disciples. To satisfy their doubts, and confirm their faith, he sent two of them with a message to Jesus, telling them to go and say to him, "Art thou he that should come, or look we for another?"

The messengers having arrived, presented their message, to which Jesus replied, not at first in words,

but by significant action. In the same hour he cured many of their infirmities and plagues, and evil spirits, and unto many that were blind he gave sight. He then said to the messengers, "Go and show John again those things which ye do hear and see. The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached unto them; and blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me."

We shall see the beauty and force of this answer if we consider two passages in the prophecies of Isaiah. Speaking of the times, and works of the Messiah, he says, "Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then shall the lame leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb

shall sing." The other passage runs thus: the prophet, speaking in the person of the Messiah, says, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound."

Now John was doubtless well acquainted with these prophecies, and would not fail to point out the force of the reply which Jesus had made to his disciples. He would tell them that the works which they had seen Jesus perform—opening the eyes of the blind, healing the sick, and preaching the good tidings of salvation—were the very works which Isaiah had long ago predicted as the works of the Messiah.

After the messengers of John had

returned, Jesus improved the occasion by bearing honourable testimony to his faithful, but now imprisoned herald. "What," said he, "went ye out into the wilderness for to see? A reed shaken with the wind. But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in soft raiment. Behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet, yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet."

The meaning of this address may be thus expressed:—"Do you recollect in what multitudes you flocked to the preaching of John? And what kind of a man did you find? One wavering in his testimony as the reeds on the banks of the Jordan where he preached? or rather, did you not hear him testify with the utmost constancy, that the Messiah was at hand? Did you find him like

a fawning courtier, who is ready to pay for his elegant dress, and costly living, in soft words and lying flatteries, and careful avoidance of whatever might give offence? Or did you not rather find a man of plain fidelity, who showed himself above the frown or favour of the world? If this was his character, as you well know it was, then you went out to hear a prophet—one commissioned by God, acting under the impulse of inspiration, and appointed, like the ancient prophets, to warn a guilty people, and to describe the character and glories of the Messiah. In all these respects John was truly a prophet, but he was more than this. He came as the herald of the Messiah, and actually introduced him to you, and bade you behold the Lamb of God, the divinely appointed sacrifice for the sin of the world." Jesus then went on to say

John was the very prophet spoken of by Malachi as the Messiah's forerunner, who, having prepared the way, should be immediately followed by the Messiah himself. He also assured them, that among them that had been born, there had not been a greater prophet than John. "But," said he, "he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."

By the "kingdom of heaven" here, he meant the heavenly kingdom which he had himself come to set up on earth. The least prophet or teacher who was able to attest the actual death, resurrection, and ascension of the Messiah, and the gift of his Spirit in its miraculous energies, was greater in office than John—able to testify truths which John saw only at a distance.

Our Lord then went on to observe that since the days of John, the king-

dom of heaven suffered violence, and that the violent were taking it as by force. In spite of the calumnies heaped upon the preaching of John, and his own, by the Jewish teachers and rulers, many were eagerly receiving it and pressing into the gospel kingdom, like a multitude rushing to take a city by assault.

Jesus then went on to address the fault-finding, unbelieving scribes and Pharisees, and those who had imbibed their spirit. He compared them to pettish, ill-humoured children, who, gathering in the market places or public squares, began their sports by imitating the dances at a public feast, or the lamentations at a funeral, but soon falling out with each other; the one party saying to the other, We have piped in cheerful strains, but ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, have played the sorrowful

funeral dirge, but ye have not lamented, have not joined us in the sad strain. "This is an exact picture of your conduct. For John came neither eating nor drinking, he did not live a social life, nor attend any of your domestic feasts, and ye say he hath a devil, a demon which drives him into solitude, and overwhelms him with melancholy. The Son of man came eating and drinking. He lived with men in cities, and when invited, attended marriages, and other feasts, to sanctify the cheerfulness of family meetings, to engage the attention of the guests to his heavenly doctrine, to overcome their prejudices by his mild and condescending manners, and to make the customs of social life the means of conveying instruction by founding parables upon them. But for all this, he is slandered as gluttonous, a wine-bibber, and

a friend, not of the souls, but of the vices of publicans and sinners. With such virulence do you treat both the master and his servant, and so easy is it for your envy and malice to give an odious colouring to the most wise and holy conduct.”*

CHAPTER XI.

Woman—A contrast—The feast—The dance—
An infamous proposal—The murder of the prophet.

“ Woman, dear woman ! in whose name
Wife, sister, mother, meet :
Thine is the heart by earliest claim,
And thine its latest beat.
In thee the angel virtues shine ;
An angel form to thee is given ;
Thine be an angel’s office then,
To lead the soul to heaven.”

How beautifully do these lines describe the character and office of woman ! In her we look for whatever is fair and lovely. Elegance, modes-

* See Watson on the place.

ty, tenderness, and sympathy are hers. We find her a ministering angel in the cottage of poverty, and by the bed of affliction. If any one has a tear of sympathy to shed over our sorrows, or a tongue of eloquent tenderness to plead for their alleviation, it is woman :

“ Hers is a mild and gentle power
That prospers in affliction’s hour :
————— then woman lends
Her words of solace, and her smile
Comes with an influence to bless
Where all seem’d drear and comfortless,
And sheds around such holy light
As makes e’en desolation bright.”

Such is a *virtuous* woman. But if this be the portrait of a woman of virtue, how shall we draw that of an *immodest* woman ? There is no being so vile on the face of the earth, and none so much to be feared. Her wiles are more artful and seductive, her heart more treacherous, and her

vengeance more dark and deadly, than any thing that can be found out of the breast of a fiend. Let our history illustrate this.

John had been for many months, perhaps about eighteen, immured in prison. The anger of Herod had somewhat softened down, but the dark spirit of *feminine* vengeance had lost none of *its* deadly rage. The shameless and vengeful Herodias eagerly thirsted for John's blood. Nor was it long before an opportunity offered for indulging her hate.

About this time Herod celebrated his birth-day by a splendid feast. His nobles and chief officers, upon invitation, sat down to the sumptuous entertainment. The wine no doubt passed freely round, and Herod with his guests had become merry. Just then a beautiful young damsel glided into the festive hall. It was Salome,

the daughter of Herodias. She had come, doubtless by the direction of her infamous mother, to dance before the company. Herod, who was probably flushed with wine, was highly pleased with her elegant movements, and expressed unbounded delight. Thus he publicly and shamelessly gloried in his infamy, this daughter of Herodias being the offspring of Philip, whom Herodias had deserted, and whose child as well as wife had been induced, by the wiles of a wicked brother, to leave him.

It was no uncommon thing for the kings and nobles of ancient times to make rash vows in their revels, and to seal them with oaths. Herod on the present occasion made one of these rash oaths. He promised to give the dancer whatever she would ask, even if it were half of his kingdom.

Salome went and informed her

mother of the promise, and asked what she should choose. And now the spirit of the serpent stirred in this infamous woman. Her eyes sparkled like those of a basilisk* just ready to dart upon its prey. She told her daughter to go and ask for the head of John the Baptist to be brought her. And this is a *mother* giving instructions to her *child*! What a fiend was such a mother! and what a promising daughter to receive such instructions! and what a *present* from a young lady was the bloody head of a murdered prophet! Behold the character of a woman who has lost her *modesty*, and given herself up to a life of *criminal indulgence*! Behold the effects of being educated by such a mother! Salome goes in before the whole company, and says to Herod, "I will that thou give me the head

* A serpent of rare beauty and as great malignity.

of John the Baptist in a charger," (a large dish.)

And what should we expect from Herod on the presentation of such a request? Is he not shocked, astonished, and filled with shame? Do not his nobles start back with abhorrence from such a proposal? We should suppose Herod would have told her, he intended no such thing in his promise: that he should never have made it, had he supposed her capable of making such a request, and that he should be a thousand times more guilty in keeping his oath than in breaking it.

But nothing of this. There were two motives that weighed more with him than mercy, justice, or reason. He had a blind passion for his bloody wife, which made him unwilling to displease her in any thing. He was surrounded by vile courtiers, who

most likely hated John. Probably a great part of them were infidel Sadducees, who would be very willing to urge the request of Salome by way of paying court to Herodias. Had they been any thing better, they would have interposed in behalf of John, and told Herod that no oath could bind him to commit murder.

But again, Herod pretended to be *a man of conscience*. O yes! a man of conscience! "*For his oath's sake*" he would not refuse the request. So he determined to MURDER a holy prophet for conscience' sake, and sent an executioner to bring the head of the innocent and excellent John!

The hour had now come when this eminent prophet was to bow his head to the stroke of the executioner. Though the sacred history does not conduct us to the prison to witness the closing scene, still we are at no great

loss in determining its character. The life of this holy man everywhere evinced the fearlessness of virtue ; and he who has courage enough to do his duty, has always courage enough to die. Besides, to a soul fully prepared for heaven, death has no terrors. St. Paul calls it a *departure*. It is like leaving a land of exile for home ; like a long absent child departing to return to his parents' arms. Doubtless John could say as St. Paul afterward said, "I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight ; I have finished my course ; I have kept the faith : henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me at that day, and not to me only, but to all them that love his appearing." "I have therefore a desire to depart and be

with Christ, which is far better ; for to die is gain. O death, where is thy sting ? O grave, where is thy victory ?”

The executioner came, and having accomplished his bloody work, he carried the head of the murdered prophet to Salome, who presented it to her mother. St. Jerome, an early Christian writer, tells us, that when Herodias received it she exultingly drew out the tongue, which by its reproofs had planted thorns in her criminal pillow, and pierced it with a bodkin.

The body, which had probably been thrown over the wall as unworthy of burial, was taken up by John’s disciples, and decently laid in the tomb. With what mournful feelings did these bereaved friends follow it to the grave ! What mingled emotions did they feel as they raised their thoughts to heaven, to which the spirit had winged

its way, and then turned them back on the scenes of his former ministry !

When they had performed the last sad rites, they went and told Jesus.

Thus died, in the morn of his prime, one of the greatest of prophets, the most holy of saints, and eloquent of ministers. Our Saviour pronounces one of the finest eulogies upon him in a single sentence: "HE WAS A BURNING AND A SHINING LIGHT."

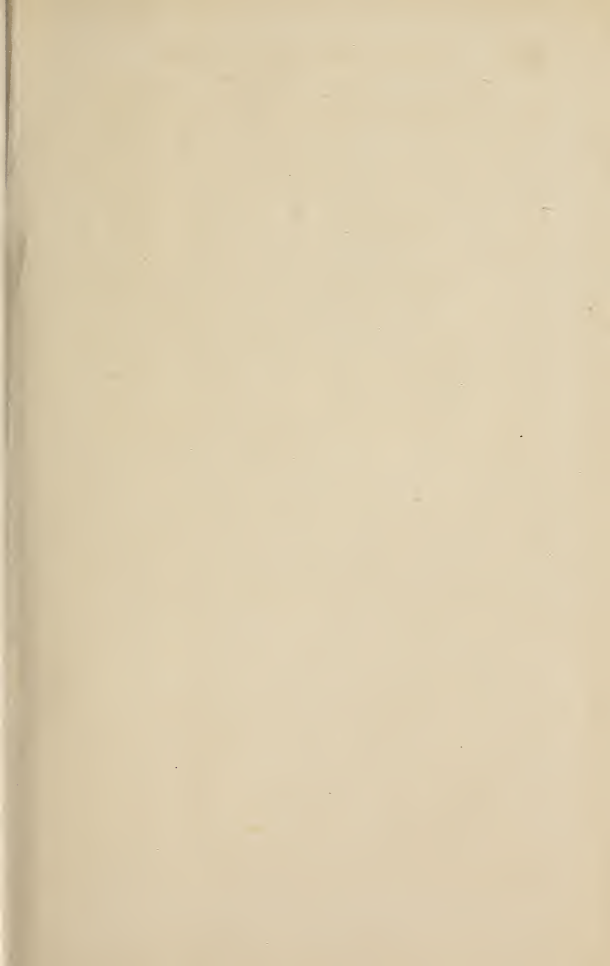
"O! there was one—on earth a while
He dwelt ;—but transient as a smile
That turns into a tear,
His beauteous image pass'd us by.
He came like lightning from the sky ;
He seem'd as dazzling to the eye
As prompt to disappear.

The loveliest star of evening's train
Sets early in the western main,
And leaves the world in night.
The brightest star of morning's host,
Scarce risen, in brighter beams is lost.
Thus sank his form on ocean's coast,
Thus sprang his soul to light.

Revolving his mysterious lot
We mourn him, but we praise him not :
 Glory to God be given,
Who sent him, like the radiant bow,
His covenant of peace to show
Athwart the breaking storm to glow,
 Then vanish into heaven.

O, church ! to whom his name is dear,
The angel of thy mercies here,
 Behold the path he trod—
' A milky way ' through midnight skies,
Behold the grave in which he lies :
E'en from his dust thy prophet cries,
' Prepare to meet thy God.' ”

THE END.





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